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SUBJECT: FRENCH NEXT STEPS ON LEBANON AWAIT CRITICAL
LEBANESE BY-ELECTION RESULTS

REF: BEIRUT 1162

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4.(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: As of August 3, France was waiting until after the August 5 parliamentary by-elections to decide what to do next in Lebanon, including the possibility of a restricted meeting of Lebanese factions in Beirut per reftel. The MFA's Syria/Lebanon desk officer thought the weekend of August 25 was the most likely timeframe for FM Kouchner's next visit to Beirut, but he cautioned that a visit then was far from a given after the frustrating last round. A return trip by Cousseran to Damascus was under discussion but doubtful; instead, France's ambassador to Syria may deliver any follow-up message regarding Lebanon. Cousseran would certainly return to Beirut to prepare the way for another Kouchner visit. No further contact with Iran on Lebanon is in the cards. In Cairo, Kouchner rebuffed Egyptian entreaties to ease up on the Syrians and was reassured by the Saudis' continued hard line. Our MFA contact mused that identifying the likely candidates for president would begin overriding interest in an overall package to resolve the Lebanese political crisis after the Metn by-election. Non-French observers are increasingly critical of Kouchner's over-reliance on Lebanese Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri to counter Hezbollah's political lock on the Shi'a community. We will seek an update on MFA views now that Michel Aoun's candidate is the declared -- if disputed -- winner of the Metn by-election. End summary.

¶2. (C) Following up on reftel with the French MFA on August 2, Syria/Lebanon desk officer Jean-Christophe Auge was adamant that no final decision had been taken on the restricted meeting with Lebanese factions in Beirut. He expected a decision after the August 5 by-elections, whose outcome (especially the crucial Metn race) would help clarify how the key Lebanese players viewed things. In addition, the MFA was debating how the "excluded" members of the 14 factions would respond to France seeming to favor a smaller, more elect group.

¶3. (C) As the MFA has stated publicly on several occasions, the timing of Kouchner's next trip to Beirut is unclear but tentatively set for late August. Auge gave August 25 as the most likely date for Kouchner to resume his efforts. Cousseran would go out ahead of Kouchner to pave the way as before. The possibility of another Damascus stop is also under discussion, but the lack of a new message to present (or a new formulation of the same firm message) has given people at the Quai pause about sending Cousseran to Syria again. It may turn out that the French ambassador in

Damascus will receive instructions to say whatever it is France decides to tell Syria before the next Kouchner visit to Beirut. Auge categorically ruled out any Cousseran visit to Tehran in the near future to discuss Lebanon: "We know what they have to say, and it is not very much." (Comment: We suspect that the Quai's reluctance is partly based on a desire that trips to Syria and Iran not be interpreted as contradicting or minimizing the importance of Kouchner's consistently tough public line when talking about the obstructionist role those countries are playing in Lebanon. Auge acknowledged that Kouchner's characteristically blunt criticisms had aroused ire in both capitals. End comment.)

¶4. (C) Among other points in reftel, Auge confirmed Kouchner's firm refusal in the face of Egyptian pressure to agree to some sort of deal with Syria regarding the Special Tribunal to "immunize" President Asad and others around him from possible prosecution. Kouchner flatly refused and reaffirmed France's unwillingness to ease up on Damascus out of concern that all the important work achieved over the past two years would be lost. Auge expected Lebanon to be one of the subjects on Egyptian President Mubarak's agenda during his visit to France (which was still ongoing as our meeting occurred). By contrast with the Egyptian foreign minister, Saudi Foreign Minister Sa'ud al-Faisal underscored that Riyadh's distrust of Syria, *inter alia* for its interference in Lebanon, had not weakened. Arab League SecGen 'Amr Musa, meanwhile, reportedly had little to say except to commiserate with Kouchner about the difficulties and frustrations associated with trying to bring Lebanese leaders to agreement.

¶5. (C) During a lengthy review of the most recent political developments, Auge described Kouchner's high level of frustration over the failure (though he was careful not to

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use that word) of his last visit to bring the parties together in a clear and meaningful way. The lunch gathered most of the leaders in the same room, but the tensions among personalities like Amine Gemayel and Michel Aoun was palpable. Hizballah's intransigence remained solid, and Nabih Berri (who did not attend the lunch) proved unable or unwilling to make headway on the package Kouchner had informally tabled at Celle Saint-Cloud. The differences among March 14 leaders, especially on the Christian side, continued to be most unsettling. As his boss, NEA A/S-equivalent Felix-Paganon had done prior to Kouchner's last trip to Beirut, Auge emphasized the importance of the August 5 by-elections in determining what would likely happen next. Uncertainty about the Armenian vote made it hard for the Quai to predict whether Gemayel would carry the day or the seat would go to Aoun's candidate.

¶6. (C) The French are hearing from a plethora of Lebanese contacts proposals for a package settlement and arguments in favor of various presidential candidates. Auge stated the French have been noncommittal in response, except when the proposals clearly cross red lines (such as those involving the Special Tribunal). The aftermath of the Metn by-election, he predicted, could quickly intensify the campaigning by presidential wannabes and crystallize the positions of those toying with hitherto closely guarded proposals to get out of the political impasse and avert an "explosion." We agreed to consult after the by-elections.

Comment:

¶7. (C) The image Auge conjured up of the French MFA feverishly debating next steps contrasts sharply with the reality of a mostly empty Quai d'Orsay, where summer vacations and turnovers of positions have left the place decimated. Auge did allow as how a vacationing Cousseran has been warned to stay in close proximity should he need to be dispatched in a hurry. Our non-French contacts confirm that Kouchner found his Beirut consultations far more frustrating

than the round he hosted in Celle Saint-Cloud. Some believe he has placed too much stock in Nabih Berri and the notion, fueled by Kouchner's experience providing relief to south Lebanon in the 1980s as minister of state for humanitarian assistance, that Hizballah does not speak for all Lebanese Shi'a. His area experts point out that Kouchner is learning the hard way that, although his contention may be true, Hizballah has ruthlessly imposed itself as the voice of the majority of Lebanese Shi'a and is too entrenched for Berri and others to dislodge. Despite continued French references to crafting a "package" that would incorporate a national unity government as well as agreement on an acceptable presidential candidate not dictated by Syria, the MFA seems to be accepting that attention is rapidly focusing solely on identifying the candidate. Auge suggested that this could become the overriding concern of all factions but Hizballah, which will hold to its insistence on forming a government that meets its demands, after the August 5 elections. Whatever the outcome, the French recognize the rising stakes as Lebanon risks drifting into greater polarization with an increasingly fragmented majority.

¶8. (C) Now that Aoun's candidate has been declared the official winner in the still-disputed Metn by-election, we will check with the MFA for an update of Quai thinking. We note that departing French Ambassador Emie's August 2 farewell call on Lebanese President Lahoud had Lebanese tongues in Paris wagging as we headed into this crucial weekend. Few will have bought the MFA's public statement that it had only been a "protocol" formality.

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